

Conducting a new score: Tacoma Symphony Orchestra's incoming director Sarah Ioannides

BY ROSEMARY PONNEKANTI

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Museum of Glass executive director Susan Warner, left, and Sarah Ioannides, the new conductor for the Tacoma Symphony Orchestra, chat during a tour of the museum Sept. 27, 2014. **DEAN J. KOEPFLER — Staff photographer**

Growing up in England, Sarah Ioannides was the kind of teenager who played every instrument she could find. Violin, horn and piano were the main ones. She also tried viola, saxophone and guitar.

But as much as she was intrigued by the different musical sounds, Ioannides — who'll step onto the podium as the Tacoma Symphony Orchestra's new music director on Oct. 25 — also was fascinated by psychology and what makes people tick.

The combination led her to a successful conducting career — and to becoming the kind of musical director who's as much about exploring new ideas as collaboration and community.

“The tricky part of the puzzle (is) branching out in new directions, but never sacrificing the essentials to do it,” Ioannides — pronounced “ee-oh-NEED-eeze” — said during a recent week in Tacoma exploring venues and meeting folks.

“An orchestra can change its color, but needs to retain its identity.”

Ioannides, through several immediate changes, is helping shape that identity right now.

She’s already sculpted this season’s programming. She’s keeping the orchestra’s classical core, out of a deep-rooted love for symphonic masterworks.

Beyond that, she’s introducing contemporary works and early 20th century pieces new to Tacoma audiences. She’s also bringing in high-ranking soloists such as percussion superstar Dame Evelyn Glennie, who’ll perform on opening night.

Other changes include a new interactive youth education program and collaboration with the Tacoma City Ballet for two major productions.

There also are hints at possible new venues from the Foss Waterway Seaport to Puyallup’s Karshner Museum — all before Ioannides has even picked up the TSO baton.

EXPANDING REPERTOIRE, ATTRACTING SOLOISTS

Ioannides won the TSO gig after a two-year national search, 120 applicants and four finalist auditions.

At 42, she’s still moving up through the conducting world.

She was an assistant to conducting titans Paavo Jarvi and Tan Dun and has guest-conducted nationally and internationally, from the Royal Philharmonic to the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra.

She worked alongside conductor-composers Esa-

IF YOU GO

What: Tacoma Symphony Orchestra season opening.

Who: New symphony director Sarah Ioannides with percussionist Evelyn Glennie; the Tacoma Symphony Women’s Chorus.

When: 7:30 p.m. Oct. 25.

Where: Pantages Theater, 901 Broadway, Tacoma.

Tickets: \$19, \$29, \$47, \$69, \$79.

Information: [253-591-5894](tel:253-591-5894), broadwaycenter.org; [253-272-7264](tel:253-272-7264), tacomasymphony.org.

GETTING TO KNOW SARAH IOANNIDES

It’s been 18 months since Sarah Ioannides conducted the Tacoma Symphony Orchestra at her audition. Here’s a refresher on the orchestra’s new music director.

Age: 42.

Born: Canberra, Australia.

Grew up: Wales, Shropshire, Surrey (United Kingdom).

Educated: Oxford University, Guildhall School, Curtis Institute of Music, Juilliard School of Music.

Family: Husband Scott Hartman (trombone professor at Yale University), daughters Audrey, 6; and Elsa, 4; son Karl, 4.

Current home: Connecticut and South Carolina, where she is music director of the Spartanburg Philharmonic.

Conducting influences: Bernard Haitink, Paavo Jarvi, Otto-Werner Mueller.

Plays: Piano, violin, viola and horn, among other instruments.

Says Ioannides: “I use the piano for score reading and accompanying occasionally. I have played viola most recently (for fun); I still teach violin (to daughter Audrey); I occasionally pick up the horn and get a few notes out, but then my lip gives in. And I am most recently learning the ukelele with my son Karl.”

Interests: Swimming, yoga, the outdoors, cooking, watching movies, going to museums, spending time with friends and family, seeing other orchestras.

Pekka Salonen and Pierre Boulez, and had directorships at the El Paso Symphony and Spartanburg Philharmonic — her other current position.

The New York Times has described her as a conductor with “unquestionable strength and authority.”

The TSO five-year contract — while a definite success — could be seen as just one more step in the difficult journey of a conducting career.

But Ioannides’ programming speaks of a true commitment to Tacoma. That she’s serious about her new position can be seen right from the opening concert of the season.

Headlining the program will be Glennie, a renowned percussionist and the kind of soloist towns like Tacoma rarely see.

Glennie will be playing a world premiere concerto composed for this performance by Sean O’Boyle, an Australian composer who fuses classical with a strong jazz tradition.

Filling out the program will be Ravel’s “Bolero,” Respighi’s “The Pines of Rome” and Debussy’s “Nocturnes,” three late-Romantic works that are crowd-pleasers without being predictable.

The rest of the season is filled with equally complex or new music — Brahms’ Symphony No. 2, Dvorák’s Symphony No. 8, Sibelius’ “Finlandia,” reconceived with choir, and Holst’s “The Planets” in a multimedia version with NASA images from the Hubble telescope.

Soloists will include Olympia native and piano protegee Charlie Allbright, violinist Vadim Gluzman and cellist Amit Peled.

“I wanted to spotlight pieces that haven’t been done recently here, that I feel strongly about,” Ioannides said in explaining her choices. “I wanted a mix of all-time favorites and new things.”

Ioannides is helped by her 10-year position at Spartanburg, South Carolina: Allbright came onto her radar when he was a last-minute substitute for the Philharmonic’s opening concert last month, and Glennie is booked to play O’Boyle’s concerto with them in February.

The March Irish pops concert, “Songs from the Emerald Isle,” is another Spartanburg import. Yet the contacts and experience Ioannides has gotten from her other job can only benefit Tacoma.

Jim Hudgens, a long-time member of the Spartanburg Philharmonic’s board, was chairman of the search committee that recommended Ioannides there 10 years ago.

“The musicians wanted someone who would bring the orchestra to a higher level,” he said. “She’s absolutely (done that). We love her.”

Among Ioannides' strengths, Hudgens said, is being completely prepared and "unflappable" during concerts, her receptiveness to new ideas and her ability to engage with children.

"She's very down to earth," Hudgens said.

BRINGING IN THE KIDS

A more subtle Ioannides change — and one that will affect Tacoma's youngest music-lovers — is with the TSO's Simply Symphonic program.

Under Ioannides, the program — an initiative of former director Harvey Felder that brings orchestral experience and learning to more than 4,000 fifth-graders each year — is going interactive.

Having helped pilot the Link Up program of Carnegie Hall's Weill Institute — in which students learn easy parts on recorder (or sing) and get to play along with the orchestra in concert — Ioannides is bringing Link Up to Tacoma.

In April, about 4,300 students from more than 70 schools will receive teacher instruction packets, music to learn, CDs and workbooks. Then they'll get the opportunity to play in a Pantages concert along with orchestra, narrator and multimedia.

"It has the potential to be a very meaningful experience for our students," said Stephanie Menefee, music teacher at Point Defiance Elementary, which has sent students to Simply Symphonic for many years.

"As an educator and a musician, I think that experiencing a concert both through active participation on an instrument and participation through attentive listening have different but equal value."

Asked about Link Up, Ioannides, who has three young children, all of whom study music, echoes recent research showing that kids who learn music do better academically, especially in math and science.

She also said she believes it's a "critical tool" for young people to achieve the self-esteem that comes with learning something.

But it's when she talks about the experience of playing music with a group of like-minded people that Ioannides' brown eyes light up.

"It's a unique sharing experience, an incredible moment of time when a large body of people are focused on the same thing," she said. "There's a greater sum of energy that comes out of that."

That sensation, the overwhelming experience of simultaneous belonging and creation, drew the teenage Ioannides into orchestra playing in the first place.

Despite starting violin lessons at 6 (as her elder daughter now does), Ioannides wasn't overly immersed in music, she says. Her Cypriot father, professional conductor Ayis Ioannides, lived separately in Germany; her mother sang in choirs.

Growing up, she had many other interests: hockey, swimming, diving, gymnastics, cross-country running. Her world changed when she began playing in youth orchestras at age 10 and won a place in England's National Youth Orchestra at 17.

"Classical music was my sanctuary," she said. "That's why I'm in it (now). The synergy that comes as a result of playing this wonderful music together felt like a big gift to my heart."

COLLABORATION, NEW VENUES

The third big change Tacomans will notice in their new symphony director is that she's not just conducting symphonies.

In addition to leading the annual "Messiah" performance (now expanded to a Gig Harbor as well as Tacoma concert), Ioannides will spend December conducting the orchestra in "The Nutcracker" with Tacoma City Ballet. In the spring will come a big production of "Cinderella."

Tacoma City Ballet director Erin Ceragioli had been thinking about hiring the orchestra again for "Nutcracker" since December. (The orchestra played it from 1984 to 2004, when the Northwest Sinfonietta took over for a decade.)

Ioannides' willingness to collaborate sealed the deal for both ballets, with more intended for future seasons.

"I love her — she's great," said Ceragioli, one of several Tacoma arts leaders Ioannides met with on her recent visit. "She seems so eager to work with the ballet and wants to really do a good job."

"She'd already watched our DVD and came in with suggestions and musical questions. I really appreciate that she wants everything to be just right, to sound beautiful. It's not just a paid gig (for her)."

"I'm interested in the city as a whole," Ioannides said. "I'm looking at how to bring the orchestra to the community ... and for me that means getting to know the community. It's a captivating place — it's interesting, unique."

A big part of that question is the identity of the orchestra.

As a second city, Tacoma already suffers from music patrons who prefer to travel to Seattle to hear the symphony there, or soloists who prefer the bigger status.

It's a challenge Ioannides seems keen to meet.

“It’s one of the things I hope to develop here — how the Tacoma Symphony will be unique,” she said. “We’ll be doing things the Seattle Symphony doesn’t do because of my background, the composers I like. ... Just because it doesn’t have as high a budget doesn’t mean it’s any less attractive.”

Alternative venues might just be some of those things the TSO will do differently.

On her recent visit Ioannides toured the Tacoma Art Museum, the Museum of Glass, the Foss Waterway Seaport, the Karshner Museum and more to get some ideas for possible future venues outside of the Pantages and Rialto theaters.

She liked what she found and is “discussing future collaborations” with some of the venues.

But while Ioannides seems willing to explore new ideas, she’s firm on keeping the core of what the Tacoma Symphony — or any orchestra — does best: classical repertoire.

“An orchestra needs to play at the highest possible level for people who just want to hear great music,” she said. “You can play Brahms and Dvorák, and also do puppet shows or Cirque du Soleil.”

“But you want to perpetuate the masterworks, because they are such genius works and can really make a difference for people.”

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